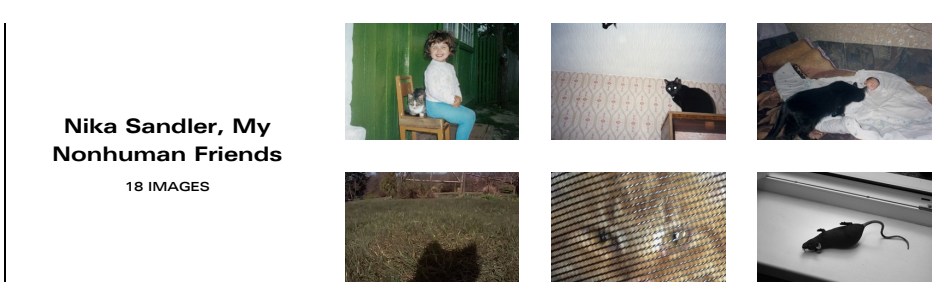




Courtesy of the artist

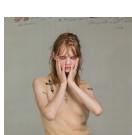
This uncanny photo series explores the feline gaze

My Nonhuman Friends by artist Nika Sandler incorporates archival family photographs and cats' POV images to create a tactile, surreal exploration of the mysterious feline world

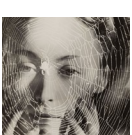


Cats have long held a powerful and unique place in peoples' homes and families. They've been revered in many cultures and religions and, from Egypt to China, there's evidence to suggest the animals have lived as domestic pets for over 12,000 years. Artist [Nika Sandler](#) has always had a deep affinity with these enigmatic creatures. "Since birth, I have always been surrounded by cats," she recalls. "The first being who became interested in me after I was discharged from the hospital was a cat, Boris. He stood on the bed and stared at me. He had never seen a human child before. Fortunately, he liked me." Remaining under Boris' "watchful eye" from that day on, the significance of this important childhood relationship would resonate throughout her life. "My friendship with cats had begun."

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Fascinated by and somewhat beholden to catkind, the Moscow-born visual artist was moved to begin exploring and documenting this compelling reciprocal relationship when, last year, her beloved feline friend Raymond died suddenly. At times surreal, nostalgic, and deeply tactile, *My Nonhuman Friends* incorporates archival photographs from the artist's family albums, some of which are magnified many times in an attempt to "look at and recall the smallest details in a catlike, far-sighted way". The close-ups of teeth, claws, fur and tongues evoke the physicality of cats; the sensation of their presence.

Echoing the reciprocity of the relationship, this series also explores the feline gaze. Sandler uses screenshots taken from cameras on their collars to illustrate a cats-eye perspective of the world. Characteristic of Sandler's work, these pictures are funny and odd, offering an uncanny alternative vision of the world around us that, to quote *Metal* magazine, succeeds in being both "introspective and extrospective".

Below, we talk to Nika Sandler about *My Nonhuman Friends*, the process behind her work, and depicting a day in the life of cats.



Courtesy of the artist

Please could you begin by introducing us to this project and how it was conceived?

Nika Sandler: This project is an exploration of the relationship between humans and cats. The impetus for its creation came from grieving for my beloved cat Raymond, who passed away suddenly from a heart condition. This series began with still-life pictures of his belongings.

Why do you think you feel a particular affinity with cats?

Nika Sandler: I think it's because they've been with me since I was born. From the first day I was discharged from the hospital, Baron the cat looked after me. He treated me as if I were his own cub. Our friendship lasted 12 years until he died.

Could you tell us about some of the important relationships you've had with cats over the years?

Nika Sandler: The first important relationship was with Baron [previously mentioned]. At the same time, I made friends in the village where my parents sent me on summer holidays. Among them were my great-grandmother's cats Rosa and Murka, and the neighbour's cats Senya, Mafia and Boris. I had a close relationship with Senya. We often played together, cuddled and sat quietly looking into the distance. We also fed each other: I fed him my grandmother's cutlets, and he fed me rodents he caught in the field. Then, when I was thirteen, I was given a cat named Raymond. I felt like his big sister. He made me feel very fond of him. I kept him safe.

"I've always admired cats. I find every part of their body perfect" – Nika Sandler

There's something very visceral about the images, they evoke the sensation of physical contact with cats. Could you tell us about this aspect of the series?

Nika Sandler: I've always admired cats. I find every part of their body perfect. So, while working on this series, I had the idea of incorporating the claws and hair into still-life pictures. I also turned to archival photographs. I enlarged some of them to recreate the smallest details of my feline friends. After manipulating the photos, the familiar features of the cats became blurred. This caused me to associate with the gradual distortion of images in human memory and the farsightedness of cats.

There's an autobiographical element to this series. Could you tell us about the process of going through your archive of pictures and tracing your history with cats?

Nika Sandler: I've come a long and fascinating way from studying family albums of photos of me and my cats on film and digital soapboxes to sorting through folders on my personal computer and external hard drive with joint selfies on the phone and photos on DSLR and mirrorless cameras. I grew older and technology changed, but our relationship with the cats, judging by looking through the archives, remained consistently warm.



Courtesy of the artist

Cats are usually quite independent creatures with a quality of mystery. Using screenshots from cameras on their collars, your series also follows the lives of cats when they're off on their own private business. Could you tell us more about why you chose to include these insights into their exploits and the insights you gained?

Nika Sandler: I wanted to show a day in the life of cats through their eyes. I aimed to capture their agency. I realised that cats are incredibly inquisitive explorers, keen observers and agile hunters. I knew this before, but thanks to the cameras on their collars, it became obvious to me. I also felt that I would like to be a cat.

What stories and themes do you think emerge from *My Nonhuman Friends*?

Nika Sandler: I suppose these are themes of friendship, memory, experiencing loss and the nonhuman gaze.

What would you say are the recurring obsessions that inform your work?

Nika Sandler: I think I am constantly haunted by thoughts of mortality and the urge to look on the other side of humanity.

And what inspires you most at the moment culturally? Anything from past or present in art, literature or cinema etcetera.

Nika Sandler: Lately I've been enjoying re-reading the work of Georges Bataille, Ben Woodard and Joanna Zylińska. I am also following the [permanent beta] *The Lure of the Image* project, which is being done by the curators of [Fotomuseum Winterthur](#).

Visit the gallery above for a closer look through selected images from *My Nonhuman Friends*.

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